SYNOPSIS

TITLE

HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS FAITHS IN ANCIENT SOUTH-EASTERN BENGAL (c.7th century CE-13th century CE)

FURNISED BY ***SUHAS CHAND KAPUR***

SUPERVISOR- **DR. SARITA KHETTRY**

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(A.I.H.C. & A.), VISVA BHARATI, SHANTINIKETAN

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South-Eastern Bengal,Buddhist & non-Buddhist rulers, Patronage, Buddhism, Brahmanical Hinduism.

INTRODUCTION

South-Eastern Bengal has its own history –political, social, economic and religion- from the time of antiquities. It has been referred in different in literary and archaeological sources with a distinctive cultural identity. The political process of regionalism in Ancient South-Eastern Bengal had been started after the decline of the Gupta Dynasty under the leadership of powerful rulers with in a geo-political network of interaction with neighbouring areas.

The study of my presentation to understand the process of historical and cultural development of Ancient South-Eastern Bengal (mainly Samatata and Harikela region) under some ruling kingdoms like Rata, Natas, Khadgas, Devas (early and late both), Chandras, Varman etc. within the time of seventh to thirteen century CE. During that time and space different kinds of political, social, religious, economic as well as art and architectural development took place with its unique form of identity. The religious climate was very interesting on that time due to the friendly and rivalry position of mainly two religions- Brahmanism and Buddhism with receiving patronage directly and indirectly by the ruling dynasties. What is the reason behind that patronage through various land grants? The reason behind it might be the kings as a follower of a particular religion or to maintain their political suzerainty over the geographical zone as if there were a great number of the followers or laities of that religion. Not only was that, the emergence of the newly classes, the nature of land donations, the role of different geographical factors in understanding the 'Syncretistic Tradition' of religions, the various religious art and architectural development in

formation of monasteries and temples will be also the inclusive chapters in understanding with holistic approach in my proposed research work. So, the development of history and religions under different royal patronage within c. seventh to thirteen century CE in Ancient South-Eastern Bengal (Samatata and Harikela regions) are the prime focus in my Ph. D research work.

AREAS OF STUDY

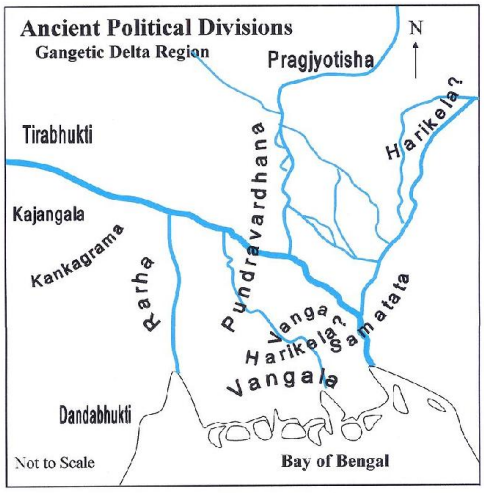
Undoubtly, the present geographical location of South-Eastern Bengal is the core part of modern Bangladesh and situated in the river bank of Meghna, which was previously known as Samatata and Harikela.

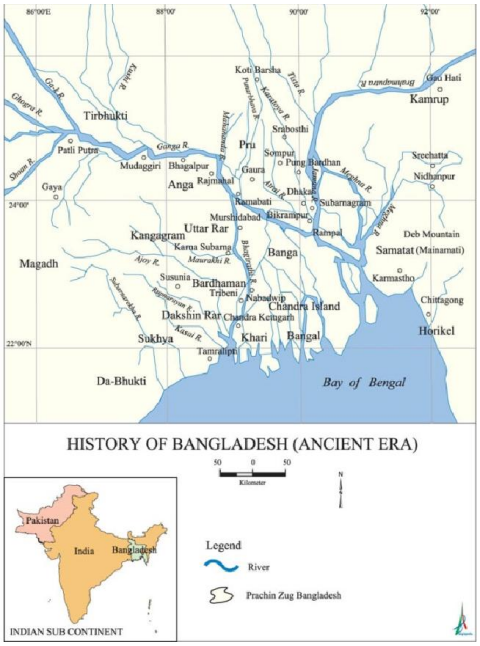
SAMATATA: As an ancient Indian region in South-Easten Bengal 'Samatata' was firstly referred to in the Allahabad Prashasti (4^{th} century CE) and later on Brihatsamhita (6^{th} century CE) as a separate state. From the 7^{th} century the chinese travellers mentioned the position of Samatata as the south of Kamarupa. According to I Tsing Samatata was ruled by a ruler named Rajavat who was similar to RajRajabhat of Ashrafpur plates. So, on the basis of epigraphical records, chinese writings and archaeological discoveries it is clear that Samatata was formed of the trans- Meghna territories of the Comilla-Noakhali plains, the adjacent part of hilly Tripura (the Atabi-Khanda division of Samatata) in the east and the Channels islands in the south.

HARIKELA: As a geographical unit of ancient South-eastern Bengal 'Harikela' previously was a matter of controversy. Former historians like R.C.Majumder and others believed that geographically the position of Harikela was in Sheehatta. According to the Indian writers of the 7^{th} century CE Harikela was the eastern Indian country and important region of eastern Bengal. I-tsing, the 7th century Chinese traveller, had defined its position as 'the eastern limit of eastern India'. This statement finds confirmation in the 9th century literary work Karpuramanjuri, which includes Harikeli girls among women of eastern Bengal. But the confusion stated by Hemachandra, the 12th century Lexicographer, in

his Abhidhanachintamani equates Harikela with Vanga. So it might be stated that from 7th to 11th century CE Harikela existed as a separate state, but later on it became the part of Vanga by Trilokyachandradeva. There is a lot of debate regarding to the exact location of Harikela. According to the present historians and archaeologist like Dr.Shariful Islam, Aksadul Alam and others, Harikela belonged to the part of Chittagong and its adjacent areas.

MAPS OF EARLY SOUTH-EASTERN BENGAL





NAME OF THE REGIONAL RULING POWERS IN ANCIENT SOUTH-EASTERN BENGAL (SAMATATA AND HARIKELA)

- The Nathas (c.620-686 CE , approximately)
- The Ratas (c. 640-675 CE approx.)
- The Kadgas (c. 615-760 CE)
- The Early Devas of Samatata (c. 760-840 CE)
- The Chandras (c. 865-1055 CE)
- The Varmans (c. 1055-1145 CE)
- The Early Deva Rulers of Harikela (c.715-Early 10^{th} century CE)
- The Later Deva Rulers of Samatata & Pattikera (c.1204-1250 CE)
- The Later Devas of Srihatta (c.1190-1250 CE)

Among the line of the ruling powers they were the followers or patronized directly or indirectly Brahmanism and Buddhism from c. seventh to thirteen century CE in Ancient South-Eastern Bengal i.e. Samatata and Harikela by donating lands or building monasteries and temples to maintain political authority as well as the religious harmony in the society. It was evident from the religious patronage in the land grants charters of early South-eastern Bengal that only nine refer to a Buddhist recipient, all other beneficiaries being Brahmins. The most interesting trend in Samatata and Harikela regions of granting land to collectives (either Buddhist or Brahmanical) is unique as pointed out by B. M. Morrison.

THE AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

Eastern India, a vast geographical area including Bengal as a part of greater India, was the last hub of Buddhism that flourished through a historical process from the earliest period to about the thirteenth century CE, i.e. from the time of Mauryan dynasty to the Gupta dynasty and later on directly or indirectly by the notable kings. After the downfall of the Gupta Empire Undivided Bengal had faced the challenges of Matsyanaya that was lasting for more than hundred years and ended by the accession of Pala dynasty in Bengal power. But in the order of changing time span modern South-Eastern Bengal (anciently known as Vanga, Samatata, Harikela) ran with a separate alternative identities in politics, religion and economic. In the study on the history of religion in Early South-eastern Bengal we can trace that the brahmanical religions in the name of Vaishnavism or Shaivism and Buddhism along with other religions mainly predominant in the society. Now, the key point is- **how were the geographical location with other factors sustained behind the religious patronage of the rulers?** Not only that, it point to be addressed- **what were the religions flourishing and which were the dynasties patronized those religions in Samatata and Harikela region and why?**

The time and space are two decisive factors in a research work. When there was a massive change in bringing out the concept of regionalism after the downfall of the Gupta dynasty, the same characteristics appeared in the political demography of South-Eastern Bengal. Different kinds of local and regional dynasties arrived and simultaneously ruled over the specific zone one after another in a chaining order. Interestingly, the rulers and the ruling dynasty were highly patronized or followed the religion 'Buddhism' in a high religious dignity by donating lands, money or building monasteries. The line of the regional powers is in the following ways-

1. The Ratas (approximately c.640-675 CE)
2. The Nathas (approx. c.620-686 CE)
3. The Khadgas (approx. c.615-760 CE)
4. The Early Devas(c.760-840 CE and later on)
5. The Chandras (c.865-1055 CE)
6. The Varmans (c.1055-1145 CE)
7. The Later Devas (c.1180-1250 CE)

By the understanding of the following dynasties we come to know that **how and why the different dynasties patronized more or less Buddhism**. **What were the factors behind the revival of the religion, Buddhism in the said region?**

The Rata Dynasty of Samatata is known from the record of two copper plate inscriptions- Kailan and udisvara copper plate of Sridharana Rata. These two copper plates refer the land donations to Buddhist monastery (Udvihara) and Brahmins for charitable purposes. The rulers- Jivadharana Rata and Sridharana, opined by Sariful Islam, was a devout follower of the Vaisnava religion by mentioning as 'Parama-Vaisnava' of Sridharana and worshipper of God 'Purusottama' (an epithet of Vishnu). Both of the rulers used Sanskrit as their official language to inscribe royal orders in inscriptions that means the Brahmins were the significant in the society during the time of Ratas. Though they were ardent followers of Brahminical religion, but has a liberal attitude to other religions, specially Buddhism by donating 30 dronavapas of land to Udvihara (Buddhist monastery). Now the question arises- **whether it was an example of religious tolerance or to avoid the religious animosity by the rulers?** Unlike the Ratas, the Nathas were the followers of Brahminical religion, shown in the Tippera (presently at Comilla region) copper plate, which bears that he granted a piece of land to his own brahmana Mahasamanta pradoshasarman. It is an example of patronage to Vaishnavism and records suggest that in the time of the two dynasties, the Ratas and the Nathas, Vaisnavism was firmly accepted in the society and followed by Buddhism in popularity in South-Eastern Bengal.

The dynasty which supplanted the Ratas was those of the Khadga dynasty that first patronize the religion Buddhism directly over the region by issuing a number of copper plates in the name of Lord Buddha or the Sangha as evident from the two copperplates discovered at Ashrafpur (near Dhaka), coins and the Chinese account of Sheng-Che (c 7^{th} century CE) ctc. The plate also refers to Mahabhogasrama where the grand religious festivals were held and eight viharas with a large number of white coloured chaityas to discuss Buddhist philosophy and religious thoughts. Another inscribed image of Devakhadga's queen Prabhavati was discovered in which the image of Sarvani, a goddess of Brahmanical pantheon, depicted. **Was it taken as a case of patronage to a local goddess by a Buddhist ruling family or as a tool to acceptance of political sovereignty to their subjects?** Not only that, it must be analyzed the question- **what was the condition of the society in favor of existing religions**

in Early South-eastern Bengal evident from the un-earthen sculptural materials and epigraphy of different dynasties?

From the Samatata region to move to Harikela (the coastal tracts of Chittagong) Buddhism popularized at its apex form and received patronage from the the Deva kings like Devatideva (dt. C. 715 CE), Kantideva and Attakaradeva and Sri-harikaladeva (c.1204-1230 CE) by donating lands for the worshipping of Lord Buddha and Dharma with the objective of repairing and renovation work of the monastery.

The Chandra dynasty ruled in south-eastern Bengal for about a century and a half, starting from the line of Purnachandra (c. 865-885 CE) to Govindrachandra (c.1020-1055 CE) and Trailokyachandra (c. 905-925 CE) with the following rulers like Srichandra, Kalyanachandra, Ladahachandra and last known king Govindrachandra continued their power of suzerainty over the territory of Samatata and Harikela region.From the religious approach the Chandras were Buddhist and the Buddhist cultural activities at Mainamati-Lalmai region with bearing an identical seal at the top with the word 'Dharma-Chakra-Mudra' and represented by the 'Wheel of the Law' flanked by two seated deer. The king has taken the epithets like Paramasaugat, Paramabhattaraka, Buddha-putrah which shows that Buddhism was the pivotal point of life during that time.

But three Mainamati copper plates have raised controversy among scholars about `the religious beliefs of the last two Chandra kings- Ladahachandra and Govindachandra, who adopted puranic Brahmanism and granted lands in the name of God Vasudeva, an epithet of Vishnu (bhagavatam-Vasudeva-bhattarakam-uddisya). In the plates of Ladahachandra yhe Chandra dynasty is said to combine the qualities of three Gods – Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswara (Shiva) which hints at the Brahminical ideas of Trinity in contradistinction of Buddhist Tri-ratnas. Not only that, Ladahachandra erected an image of Vasudeva at the shrine of Sri Ladaha Madhava whereas his son, Govindachandra made endowment in favour of Nattesvara Bhattaraka, a dancing form of Shiva. Now the question is- **why were the Chandra rulers consciously patronizing Brahmanical religion? Was the Chandra kings converted to Hinduism and giving up Buddhism? Were the Chandras liberal enough towards their non-Buddhist subjects and showed their true respect to other religions or not?** Hence, we can say in the tone of Harunur Rashid, "But it must be said with some emphasis that there is no evidence of

any sort to prove that any member of the Chandra dynasty had ever renounced Buddhism or accept Brahmanism formally, and the family in all probability may have remained, in its own way, Buddhist to the last like the Palas of North Bengal."

From around the middle of the eleventh century, the Chandras were followed by the parama-vaisnava Varmans who also ruled from Vikramapura and at the still later period, the site became the capital of the Senas, themselves devotees of Sadasiva. From then, Brahmanical religions played a pivotal role in the religious life of the people and the religion, Buddhism became disappear and cornered at the hill areas of Chittagong region.

So, lastly we must say that the history of religion in ancient South-eastern Bengal (Samatata and Harikela) became discernible in the middle of the seventh century with the formation of sub-regional kingdoms and hierarchy of subordinate rulers. In that case there were the involvement of local notables like mahattaras, adhikarana, kumaramatya-adhikarana etc to implement of the land donation for religious purpose, mentioned in the Tippera plate of Loknatha and the Kailan grants of Sridharanarata. Interestingly, in the case of donations in the copper plate inscriptions of Samatata and Harikela can be divided into two categories. One is the large scale of land grants to the brahmanas which occurred mainly in the forest tracts and another is the case of grants to Buddhist monasteries in well settle area. Now, the question- **why these kinds of land grant were distributed in a specific geographical zones? Was it only the intension to spread the notion of brahmanisation through 'agrahara' system? Were the new kinds of social class as a caste emerged due to these effects?** If we take example of the Tippera inscription of Loknatha that records a large grants of the forest land were given not only to each of one hundred ninety two brahmanas but also to some people like cook, digger as a service group to intensify the social construction on the side of political authority in this agrahara. All these are needed to focus on by studying and analyzing of the inclination of the political authorities to structure or restructure the society in the different donated tract of ancient South-eastern Bengal, both in the peripheral and well-settled tracts.

So, the religious history of ancient south-eastern Bengal must be treated by understanding of various inscriptions and also figural sculptures (stylistically and thematically) with the continuous development. In this regards, the contemporary literary works need to be more focus and discuss of the said

regions. Thus, it is true to say that and holistic approach of research methodology must be followed to reconstruct the History of Religion in Early South-eastern Bengal from the seventh to thirteen century CE.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research methodology that is method of investigation by

(a) Library work
(b) Field survey

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The ancient history of South-East Bengal which is now the core territory of independent Bangladeshis present very scantily of existing works. Very short details of historical works have been done in Early-medieval period of this area.

The best work on ancient Bengal is *History of Bengal*, Vol.1, edited by R.C.Majumder (The University of Dacca, 1943) address the history of South-East Bengal very scanty, but many new materials have come to light for fresh interpretations. Later time, R.C.Majumder updated the account of earlier work of History of Bengal by publishing his new book History of Ancient Bengal (Calcutta, 1971). In 1949 Nihar Ranjan Roy in his book *Bangalir Itihas* mainly focused on socio-cultural and economic history of ancient Bengal by reinterpreting the existing ideas and facts.

D.C.Sircar by his two writings- *Pal Purba Yuger Vamsanucharita* and *Pal Sen Yuger Vamsanucharita* (1982) addressed the genealogical account of South-East Bengal very briefly. Another important work A.M.Chowdhury's *Dynastic History of Bengal* (Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1967) in which he throws a light in two chapters shortly on the early history of South-East Bengal.

Barrie M. Morrison in his two important books- (1) *Lalmai, A Cultural Center of Early Bengal* (University of Washington Press, 1974) and (2) *Political Centers and Cultural Region in Early Bengal* (University of Arizona Press, 1970, mainly focuses on the first book the cultural importance of the archeological artifacts discovered from Mainamati, the second on the epigraphic data contains in the copper plate discovered from South-East Bengal. by his book- *The Early History of Southeast Bengal in the Light of Recent Archaeological Materials* (Itihas Academy of Dacka in 2008) Harunur Rashid attempts to evaluate the history of this area from the archaeological point of view rather than the political evolution of the region. The last work is published from Asiatic Society of Bangladesh by Shariful Islam in a title- *New Light on the History of Ancient South-East Bengal* in 2014. In this book the author mainly projects the dynastic history of this area by addressing the debates of scholars rather than rather than socio-religious position by that time.

Many scholars have done a great work to reveal the ideas of South-East Bengal, but remain incomplete. Now a fresh history has to be rewritten on this region by bringing a new interpretation of the facts. So, my humble attempt only to unfold the religious history of the rulers of this region in concerned period with special reference to archeological and literary materials.

SOURCES OF THE RESEARCH WORK

Here are the available sources for fresh investigation of my research.

A. MAJOR EPIGRAPHICAL RECORDS –

1. The Rata Dynasty of Samatata
   - Kailan Copper Plate of Sridharana Rata
   - Udisvara Copper Plate (No.3) of Sridharana Rata , Jivadharana Rata and Baladharana Rata

2. The Khadga Dynasty of Samatata
   - Ashrafpur Copper Plate of Deva Khadga
   - Salvan Vihara Copper Plate of Deva Khadga
   - Deulbadi Sarvani image inscription of Probhavati, queen of Deva Khadga
   - Mainamati Copper Plate of Balabhatta

3. The Early Devas of Samatata
   - Mainamati Copper Plate of Ananda Deva
   - Copper Plate Inscription of King Bhavadeva

4. The Early Devas of Harikela
   - Metal vase Inscription of Devatideva & Attakaradeva
   - Chittagong Copper Plate of kantideva

5. The Chandra Dynasty
   - Rampal,Kedarpur & Paschimbhaga Copper Plate of Sri Chandra Deva
   - Dhaka Copper Plate of Kalyanchandra
   - Mainamati Copper Plate of Ladahachandra & Govindachandra

6. The Later Devas of Samatata & Pattikera
   - Mainamati Copper Plate of Ranavankamalla Harikela Deva
   - Mainamati Copper Plate of Viradharadeva

B. ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOURCES –

- The excavation of Mainamati, Shalvan Vihara etc.
- The study of different types of coins (in gold, silver, and copper)
- Sculptures (local soft grey shale, inferior sand stone)
- Terracotta artifacts (indigenous school of art deep rooted in the folk art of Bengal)

C. LITERARY SOURCES –

- Chinese accounts of Hiuen Tsang, I Tsing, Sheng che
- Indigenous literary works like 'Abhidhanachintamani', Puranas etc.

BUDDHIST INSTITUTIONS AND SCULPTURE IN ANCIENT SOUTH-EASTERN BENGAL

Salban Vihara at Mainamati

Ananda Vihara at Mainamati

Buddhist Bronze Sculpture at Mainamati

Buddhist Statue at Mainamati

Avalokitesvara, Mainamati Museum

Brahmanical Sculptures in Ancient South-Eastern Bengal

Surya from Faridpur district

Visnu from Vikramapura

TENTATIVE CHAPTERS

After collecting the data the whole research work can be divided into the following chapters-

Introduction

Chapter I:

South-Eastern Bengal: Defining the Region

Chapter II:

South-Eastern Bengal: A Historical Perspective

Chapter III:

The Development of Buddhism in South-Eastern Bengal

Chapter IV:

Brahmanical Hinduism in South-Eastern Bengal: An Overview

Chapter V:

Issues of Patronage in the history of Religious faiths in Ancient South-Eastern Bengal

Epilogue / Conclusion

CONCLUSION

South-East Bengal has its own history from early times. From the time of the Mauryan dynasty to Post-Gupta period South-East Bengal (Vanga, Samatata, Harikela) formed separate political entities. Its geo-physical part differed itself from the other part of Bengal region with its own history, culture, religion and economy in Post-Gupta time to thirteen century AD. The new source materials have given us a clear understanding of the 'sub-region' with its strong economic base due to its sea trade and it help to raise Hindu-Buddhist culture in a form of architecture, sculpture and terracotta arts. In a true sense, south-Eastern Bengal was a cultural hub in Indian subcontinent and played a role of an inter-connecter between Eastern India and South East Asia.

The objective of my Ph. D research work to find out the geo-political background of South-Eastern Bengal in Post-Gupta era to know the nature of the various local ruling dynasties (subordinate or independent?) and to present the true form of history and religions in early South-East Bengal from c. seventh to the end of thirteen century CE with understanding of continuous development. So, simultaneous investigations and study need to process for re-construction of history of Ancient South Eastern Bengal and the inclusive approach of religious study would undoubtedly deserve to be written in a new way in between c. 7^{th} century to 13^{th} century CE.

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